

Our Lord's first recorded words. Bethesda meditation. 18 July 2010.

In recent Coffee Mornings we have been studying the so-called 'Seven Sayings from the Cross' – our Lord's last words before He died.

But our attention shifts for this morning from His last recorded words to His first recorded words ... to His first recorded words after He came into the world, and to His first recorded words after He rose from the dead.

The first recorded words of Jesus on earth are found in Luke chapter 2. He was, you may recall, then twelve years of age and had accompanied Mary and Joseph to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. On the return journey, having failed to locate Him among their friends and acquaintances, Mary and Joseph went back into the city, where they finally found our Lord in the temple. When Mary challenged Him, 'Child, why have you done this to us? Behold, your father and I have sought you in great distress', He replied, 'Why did you seek me? Did you not know that I must be in the things of my Father?' – by which He meant either 'that I must be about my Father's affairs – my Father's business' – or 'that I must be in my Father's house'.¹

The first words spoken by our Lord the other side of death are found in John 20.² Originally, Mary Magdalene had accompanied another Mary (the mother of James and Joses) and Salome³ to the tomb where Jesus had earlier been buried by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus.⁴ When the other women left, she ran to fetch Peter and John. But when, some time later, they also had gone back to their own homes, she had stood weeping at the tomb. Stooping to look inside, she now saw two angels in white sitting there. But she was no more interested in the two angels than she had been in the two apostles. For Mary had lost her greatest treasure.

With Jesus she had everything; without Him she had nothing. And so, as she made clear to the angels, her concern lay only with the One she still regarded as her Lord – 'they have taken away my Lord', she said, 'and I do not know where they have laid Him'. And then she saw Him ... saw the Saviour Himself ... yet she failed to recognise Him until He spoke her name.⁵

But in that one moment everything changed. For though she didn't recognise Him from His physical appearance ('supposing Him', we read, 'to be the gardener') – and though she didn't recognise Him from His kindly enquiry 'Why are you weeping? Who are you seeking?' – there was no mistaking the way He addressed her. Clearly, nobody else pronounced her name in quite this way ... no one, that is, other than the Good Shepherd, who knows every last one of His sheep by name.⁶

But when she attempted to hold onto Him, He immediately responded, 'Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, and to my God and your God"'.⁷

I said that Mary Magdalene initially accompanied Salome and another Mary⁸ to the tomb that morning – and so, according to Mark 16, she did. But I was interested to note that, according to the close of Mark 15, although these *three* women⁹ had been present at the cross ('looking on', as Mark says),¹⁰ only the two Marys were at the tomb to observe where Jesus was laid.¹¹ Salome, that is, was missing! Although I don't think it's difficult to guess the reason for her absence.

It seems clear that Salome was both the sister of Mary, the Lord's mother, and the mother of the apostle John.¹² And we know that, when, on the cross, our Lord had committed His own mother to John's care, 'from that hour', as the apostle later recorded it, he (John) had taken her to his own home.¹³ Piecing together the facts, I think we must assume that Salome accompanied her son when he escorted her heart-broken sister to his home. Hence her absence from the tomb when, several hours later, Jesus was buried.

And so Mary Magdalene was one of only two women to witness our Lord's actual burial. And it is worth noting that, just as immediately prior to the beginning of His life on earth we read of two women linked together by their joyful expectation (I refer, of course, to Elizabeth and Mary the virgin¹⁴), so immediately following its close we read of two women linked together by their sorrowful devotion.¹⁵

But consider just a few of the fascinating parallels between our Lord's first recorded words on earth and His first recorded words in resurrection.

To begin, we note that, just as His first recorded words on earth were spoken, we discover, some 'three days'¹⁶ after a Feast of the Passover, so also His first recorded words after He rose from the dead were spoken some 'three days' after a later Passover Feast.¹⁷

Then, just as His first recorded words on earth were spoken to a Mary, who, in her own words, had 'sought' Him distressed and 'sorrowing',¹⁸ so His first recorded words in resurrection were spoken to another Mary who also, we are told, 'sought' Him¹⁹ – and who sought Him distressed and 'sorrowing' – her loud and uncontrolled weeping bearing witness to her great sorrow.²⁰

Note also how both Marys had jumped to wrong conclusions. Along with her husband, Mary the mother of Jesus had 'supposed' our Lord 'to have been in the company' when they had left Jerusalem to return home. For her part, Mary Magdalene, when first she saw the Lord at the tomb, had 'supposed' Him 'to be the gardener'.²¹ Both women were, of course, sorely mistaken.

Again, note that both Mary's were gently corrected by the Lord for their actions. Following His question, 'Why did you seek me?', the Saviour asked His mother, 'Did you not know that I must be in the things of my Father?'

Following His question, 'Who are you seeking?', He charged Mary Magdalene, 'Do not cling to me ('Stop clinging to me', literally),²² 'for I have not yet ascended to my Father'. Evidently, Mary had clutched and held onto the risen Lord as the One she had known and loved ever since He had expelled the seven-fold demonic power which had once enslaved her. But He rejected her clasp, pointing her to that greater and more intimate nearness which she would enjoy after He had ascended. For had He remained on earth, Mary might at most have touched Him occasionally, but when He ascended back to the Father, she could, by the indwelling of His Spirit, benefit from that abiding and unbroken fellowship for which she longed.²³

And finally we note that, in both cases, the Lord Jesus spoke plainly of God as His Father. Back in Luke 2, fully conscious of His unique filial relationship, He had answered His mother, 'Did you not know that I must be in the things of my Father?' – His words 'my Father' clearly standing in deliberate contrast to her description of Joseph as 'your father'.

In John 20, His words to Mary 'I have not yet ascended to my Father' were immediately followed by His instruction, 'go to my brethren and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father"'.²⁴

And we can hardly miss the vast difference between these two sayings of our Lord – represented by those last three words – 'and *your* Father'.

And that 'vast difference', my brother, my sister, is explained by these symbols here this morning. For these emblems speak to us, with an eloquence all their own, of that cross which accounts for the addition of those words ... of that cross which provides the basis for our spiritual relationship to God as 'Father' ... of that cross which made it possible for us who once were, as the apostle Paul expressed it at the beginning of Ephesians 2, by nature, 'the children of wrath',²⁴ to now be, by grace, 'the children of God'.²⁵

Having earlier spoken of His followers as 'my sheep',²⁶ and 'my friends',²⁷ now, with His death and resurrection behind Him, He speaks of them as 'my brethren',²⁸ and points them to God, not only as His Father, but as theirs too. So that, by the Holy Spirit which they should shortly receive, they would be able to cry out, as He Himself had in Gethsemane, 'Abba, Father'. And that unspeakable privilege is ours too ... and all because of that death which we have come to proclaim this morning.²⁹

In the words of Mr J G Deck ...

*"Abba, Father!" We approach Thee
In our Saviour's precious Name;
We, Thy children, here assembled,
Now Thy promised blessing claim;
From our sins His blood hath washed us,
'Tis through Him our souls draw nigh,
And Thy Spirit, too, hath taught us,
"Abba, Father," thus to cry.³⁰*

Footnotes

¹ Luke 2. 41-50.

² He 'appeared first to Mary Magdalene', Mark 16. 9. What were His activities on the day of His resurrection? His very first action – and surely love would have it so – was to comfort and satisfy a broken heart. Before ever He addressed the need of Peter's '*soiled conscience*' or the Emmaus disciples' '*straying feet*', Mary's '*sorrowing heart*' had the first claim, we may say, on our Lord's attention. (Based on comments made by C. A. Coates in his address, 'The active grace of Christ risen'.) The Saviour's very first words were a repetition of the angels' words 'why are you weeping', John 20. 13 and 15.

³ Mark 16. 1.

⁴ John 19. 39-42.

⁵ 'Never was there a one-word utterance more charged with emotion than this'.

⁶ Just one word dispelled all her sorrow and dried her every tear.

⁷ John 20. 1, 11-17.

⁸ Mark 16. 1.

⁹ Along with other women. All of whom had ministered to our Lord when He had been in Galilee, Matt. 27. 55.

¹⁰ Mark 15. 40-41.

¹¹ Mark 15. 47.

¹²

SOME OF THE WOMEN WHO OBSERVED THE CRUCIFIXION		
Matthew 27. 56	Mark 15. 40	John 19. 25
Mary Magdalene	Mary Magdalene	Mary Magdalene
		Jesus' mother
Mary the mother of James and Joseph	Mary the mother of James the less and Joses	Mary the wife of Clopas
<i>The mother of Zebedee's sons</i>	<i>Salome</i>	<i>Jesus' mother's sister</i>

¹³ John 19. 27.

¹⁴ Luke 1. 39-56.

¹⁵ Mark 15. 46-47. In his gospel, Luke tells us that when the Saviour was born, He was 'wrapped' in swaddling cloths and 'laid' in a manger, Luke 2.7, and that following the Saviour's death, He was 'wrapped' in linen and 'laid' in a tomb, Luke 23. 53. How remarkable then, that at His birth our Lord had been 'wrapped' and 'laid' by a Mary while a Joseph looked on, and that at His burial He had been 'wrapped' and 'laid' by a Joseph while two Mary's looked on.

¹⁶ See 'when the days [of the Feast] were fulfilled, as they returned ... After three days they found him in the temple', Luke 2. 43-46. In all probability, this means on the third day after they had left Jerusalem. That is, the first day the spent travelling towards home, on the second they returned to Jerusalem, and on the third they found the Lord Jesus.

¹⁷ Mark 8. 31.

¹⁸ Luke 2. 48.

¹⁹ 'Who are you seeking?', John 20. 15. See also 'you seek Jesus', Matt. 28. 5, following ' ... came Mary Magdalene', Matt. 28. 1. Previously, Mary Magdalene had been *looking on*, Mark 15. 40-41; now she was *looking for*.

²⁰ The present participle, John 20. 11. The Holy Spirit lays emphasis on her unrestrained sobbing, John 20. 11, 13, 15.

²¹ John 20. 15.

²² 'The phrase translated "Do not hold on to me" translates a Greek phrase consisting of an imperative verb with a negative. We refer to this imperative + negative construction as a prohibition. It is significant here that the imperative verb is in the present tense. In a prohibition the present tense is used to indicate that ongoing action must cease. What this means is that Jesus is not saying, "Don't touch me," but "Stop touching me" = "Let go of me!", B. H. Bryant in *The College Press NIV Commentary*. Compare the words of the Shunammite concerning her beloved, 'I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go'. Although the word translated 'held' in Song 3. 4 differs from the word translated 'touch' in John 20. 17. Indeed, the word used by the Septuagint in Song 3. 4 is the same as that used by Matthew when he says of the women at the tomb, 'they came and *held* Him by the feet, and worshipped Him', Matt. 28. 9.

²³ Contrast Matt. 28. 9, where our Lord raised no objection to the other women taking hold of His feet.

²⁴ Eph. 2. 3.

²⁵ 1 John 3. 1.

²⁶ John 10. 27.

²⁷ John 15. 14.

²⁸ Matt. 28. 10; John 20. 17.

²⁹ The hymn to follow is that of J. G. Deck:

*“Abba, Father!” We approach Thee
In our Saviour’s precious Name;
We, Thy children, here assembled,
Now Thy promised blessing claim;
From our sins His blood hath washed us,
'Tis through Him our souls draw nigh,
And Thy Spirit, too, hath taught us,
“Abba, Father,” thus to cry.*

³⁰ James G. Deck, Hymns for the Poor of the Flock (appendix), 1841 edition.